

VZCZCXRO9180
OO RUEHLMC
DE RUEHLM #0629/01 1171007
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
O 271007Z APR 07
FM AMEMBASSY COLOMBO
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 5934
INFO RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 3694
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 0898
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI PRIORITY 7618
RUEHLMC/MILLENNIUM CHALLENGE CORPORATION PRIORITY
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RHEHAAA/NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS PRIORITY
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA PRIORITY 1992
RHHMUNA/HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI PRIORITY

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 05 COLOMBO 000629

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E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [PTER](#) [EINV](#) [MV](#)

SUBJECT: MALDIVES: SCENESETTER FOR ASSISTANT SECRETARY
BOUCHER'S VISIT TO MALE'

REF: COLOMBO 289 AND PREVIOUS

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Your visit to Maldives comes as this moderate Islamic nation is experiencing the political strains of an indigenous push toward democracy that began in 2004. Tensions between the government and opposition have slowed the pace of constitutional reform, frustrating many. There is potential for cross-party cooperation, but each side will need to overcome deep distrust of the other and forgo short-term political gains. Maldivians in both the government and opposition are highly receptive to U.S. inputs, so your visit is likely to have a positive impact on the progress of reforms. We will provide you with a dossier of biographic information and suggested key points prior to each of your meetings in Maldives; this scene-setter provides some background and an overview of themes you may wish to emphasize. You will meet with President Gayoom, influential political officials, and members of the nascent opposition. With all interlocutors, you should stress U.S. support for an inclusive reform process and encourage joint efforts to revise the constitution in the lead-up to the country's first-ever multi-party election, scheduled for 2008.

¶2. (SBU) SUMMARY cont'd: You will also meet resident Ambassadors and UN officials, who, in addition to the political situation, will likely discuss the drug problem endemic in Maldives and raise concerns about a possible rise in Islamic fundamentalism. Maldives' economic climate holds potential for American investors, and we plan to have you meet the Trade Minister. There will also be opportunities for public diplomacy outreach, including a press event at the American Corner in the Male' library and a discussion with women active in politics and civil society. A scheduled speech about the importance of democratic stability in the region would be an excellent opportunity to emphasize tolerance for political pluralism. In addition, you will attend the launch of the GLOBE initiative, which allows school children from around the world to collaborate over the internet to track environmental data. End summary.

BACKGROUND

¶3. (SBU) Maldives, a moderate Islamic country, is pro-U.S., cooperates on American military objectives, and is responsive to our inputs on human rights. In a single generation, it has gone from South Asia's poorest country to that with its highest per capita income. An indigenous push for democracy within this small, one-hundred percent Muslim country began

in June 2004, and there is potential for successfully establishing a liberal democracy. However, there remains a possibility that the reform process may falter and lead to a subsequent turn to anti-western practices. Your visit comes at a politically sensitive time, as tensions between the government and opposition leave the future of constitutional reform unclear.

14. (SBU) You will be the second highest ranking American official to visit Maldives in recent years, following Under Secretary Henrietta Fore's successful trip in March (reftel).

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You will meet with several government officials, including some from a reformist contingent known as "The New Maldives," led by Foreign Minister Ahmed Shaheed, who has worked diligently to bring about change. Shaheed and his colleagues perceive President Gayoom as their protector against hard-line ministers in the cabinet, and they seem to believe he is strongly committed to democratizing Maldives. Shaheed, Saeed, and five other government officials have been meeting regularly with the opposition to cover: Track 1, constitutional reform; Track 2, legislative cooperation; and Track 3, establishing an environment conducive to democratization. Nevertheless, the government continues to conduct politically motivated arrests, prosecutions, and deportations, frustrating the opposition.

UNIQUE CHALLENGES

15. (SBU) The capital island of Male', two square kilometers in size, is home to over 100,000 people. With the greatest population density of any capital city in the world, Male' is teeming with young people, some unemployed and many with

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substance abuse problems. It is no surprise that it has been a flash-point for protests and occasional violence. As it attempts the transition from autocracy to democracy, Maldives faces myriad challenges, including: distrust between the government and opposition, minimal progress on reform legislation, the potential for Islamic extremism to take root, and economic strains on citizens. However, there is potential for progress. The Commonwealth has proposed to bring government and opposition officials together outside of Maldives at a date still to be determined in the next months to facilitate talks on constitutional revisions. We think you should urge the government to show restraint and patience in dealing with the opposition. Likewise, we suggest you encourage the opposition to stay engaged in political discussions and processes. Such feedback coming from a highly placed American official is likely to have a positive impact.

TENSIONS HIGH BETWEEN
GOVERNMENT AND OPPOSITION

16. (SBU) The government and nascent opposition remain deeply wary of one another. The latest incident to raise tension occurred on April 15, following the discovery of a corpse floating in a lagoon. Many suspected the victim, who had been in detention, was killed in police custody. Security forces reported that police had released the detainee, who died in unknown circumstances afterward, but the deceased's family did not accept that account. The opposition gathered in Male' to demand explanations, and a spontaneous demonstration ensued.

17. (SBU) The press carried photos of the protest, during which police hit the opposition leader in the face before arresting him along with 12 others. Several detainees, including the opposition leader, were released the following day. The Maldivian government announced it had been exonerated by an autopsy conducted in Sri Lanka, while the

deceased's family and the opposition continued to demand an independent investigation. The government made several public statements calling on the opposition to stop using the incident for political gain. On April 25, the government ratcheted up the pressure when a court summoned four opposition activists for violating freedom of assembly regulations in 2006. On April 19, the Immigration Controller also deported Adam Cooper, a dual American-UK national working as a consultant to the MDP with a local work permit. Cooper got in touch with our Embassy, and the Ambassador contacted the Attorney General to ask about his case. The Attorney General's office confirmed that Cooper would be blacklisted from Maldives for two years. However, Cooper reported that on April 25, MDP officials met with immigration officials and requested that he be permitted to return to Maldives and remain until July, when his replacement is due to arrive. The Defense Minister, who has authority over immigration issues, said he would consider the request, Cooper told us.

ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL PRESSURES

¶8. (U) Maldives' economy, while small, is growing quickly and offers potential for U.S. exports and investment, especially in the tourism, aviation, and energy sectors. These issues will feature prominently in your meeting with the Trade Minister. However, economic concerns have created some strain in Maldives. Many locals, reluctant to break up family units by moving to resort islands to work, depend heavily on the fishing industry for income.

¶9. (SBU) The absence of a university in Maldives has left an opening for extremists from Saudi Arabia and Pakistan to offer scholarships to young Maldivians. After attending madrassahs overseas, these students often return home to espouse a fundamentalist strain of Islam antithetical to Maldives' moderate cultural roots. Many Embassy contacts have commented on the rising popularity of the Islamist Adalath (Justice) Party, which promotes "Koran over Constitution" ideals. This small group has used its role as a political party to circumvent strict laws that limit public proselytizing. Government officials will likely raise

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concerns about the potential for religious extremism. You might respond that the Embassy will use International Visitor and Speaker Programs and U.S.-Maldives Friendship Week to provide cultural exchanges that could act as one counterweight to extremist voices. We are also working with Ambassador Tahir-Kheli to develop programs to encourage the role of women, who have a strong stake in maintaining moderate Islam.

¶10. (SBU) Another major social pressure in Maldives is the prevalence of drugs, primarily heroin in the form of "brown sugar" from India, which is smoked. In January 2007 the UNICEF Resident Representative in Male' estimated up to 25,000 people, or 7 percent of the population, regularly use hard drugs. UNICEF also cited anecdotal evidence that intravenous drug use may be on the rise, creating the potential for a serious public health threat. UN officials will brief you further on this topic, and you will also have an opportunity to visit a drug treatment facility run by an American firm, Synapse.

MESSAGES FOR YOUR MEETING WITH PRESIDENT GAYOOM

¶11. (SBU) President Gayoom has ruled the country for 28 years and remains the primary catalyst in the democratization process. He announced the need for "sweeping reforms" in 2004 in response to local and international pressure following a custodial death, a subsequent prison riot, and demonstrations in Male'. Since then, Maldives has made some

notable strides forward, including the legal recognition of political parties in June 2005, improved prison conditions, increased freedom of assembly, and further freedom of the press.

¶12. (SBU) Key messages:

-- Laud the government's progress to date, especially welcoming the June 2005 cabinet reshuffle that brought reformists such as Foreign Minister Ahmed Shaheed into the foreground.

-- Express appreciation for the March 2006 publication of the "Roadmap for Reform" and urge the President to act within its spirit and keep to its time-table during this period of transition.

-- Note that the U.S. welcomes the commitment to hold Maldives' first-ever multi-party election in 2008. If it is successful, Maldives has the potential to be an unprecedented success story in the Muslim world.

-- President Gayoom has an excellent opportunity to cement his legacy by facilitating constitutional reform, promoting separation of powers, and strengthening democratic institutions in the lead-up to the 2008 election. Encourage him to work with the opposition and the Commonwealth to accomplish these objectives.

MESSAGES FOR YOUR MEETINGS WITH
REFORMIST OFFICIALS

¶13. (SBU) When you meet with Foreign Minister Shaheed and his friend and ally, Attorney General Hassan Saeed, they will likely highlight the progress on reform to date. They will acknowledge, however, that much remains to be done, and may express concerns about the potential rise of Islamic fundamentalism. Key messages:

-- Express appreciation for the reformists' efforts.

-- The Embassy will use the International Visitor and Speaker programs and U.S.-Maldives Friendship Week to promote liberal democratic ideals that may act as a counterweight to extremist views.

-- Urge Shaheed and Saeed to foster a politically tolerant atmosphere. When the government conducts prosecutions of opposition members based on laws currently being revised, this creates a perception that political dissent is still penalized.

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-- Encourage the use of internationally accepted standards for freedom of assembly and of the media.

-- Encourage the government to act within the spirit of the "Roadmap for Reform," and to cooperate with the opposition and Commonwealth.

MESSAGES FOR YOUR MEETING WITH THE OPPOSITION

¶14. (SBU) The major opposition Maldivian Democratic Party, the first to register once parties were legally recognized in June 2005, has made sincere efforts to build up its bureaucratic structures. A partnership with the UK Tories launched in February may prove productive. However, some in the Maldivian Democratic Party still interpret the role of "opposition" too literally, merely rejecting government initiatives out of hand without offering viable alternatives.

The attitude is rooted in the party's beginnings as an activist group founded by several people who served politically motivated detentions and suffered abuse in custody. Nevertheless, many in the opposition now

acknowledge the need to work with reformists in the government to implement legislative and constitutional changes. However, the party has changed its conditions for engaging in talks with the government several times.

¶15. (SBU) When you meet with opposition officials, they will likely focus on a litany of complaints, including politically motivated arrests and prosecutions, allegations of police brutality, and lack of sincerity on the government's part. You can assure them that Ambassador Blake raises these concerns with the government. The opposition also has a habit of criticizing the president and holding him personally responsible for all problems within the country. You should welcome the party's commitment to strengthening democracy in Maldives and ask that they prioritize that vital goal over short-term political gains, and work constructively with the Government and Commonwealth. You should urge that the party behave responsibly and take its political role seriously without focusing solely on civil disobedience or "street action." You should reiterate that the U.S. supports a peaceful transition to democracy and revision of the constitution, ideally leading to free, fair, multi-party election in 2008.

DEFENSE COOPERATION

¶16. (SBU) Maldives has often demonstrated its commitment to a close military-to-military relationship with the U.S. through active participation in joint exercises and by sending cadets to American service academies. Maldivian participants are competent, professional, and willing to increase interoperability between our forces. The Maldivian Defense Ministry has responded quickly and positively to requests for flight and ship clearances, and facilitated transit. In your meeting with Defense Minister Ismail Shafeeu, you may wish to express thanks and commit to continued good relations between our respective militaries.

MESSAGES FOR POLICE CHIEF

¶17. (SBU) You will also meet Chief of Police Adam Zahir, widely perceived as a hardliner. The opposition and many in the general public believe Zahir was previously responsible for abuse of prisoners, and the opposition often demands his dismissal. In December 2005, the Foreign Minister was at odds with him, privately telling poloff the police chief was undermining reform from within the government. More recently, Zahir has made efforts to improve the image of his police force, inviting foreign consultants to offer feedback and seeking training. Many in the police have responded positively, trying to incorporate improved methods. Nevertheless, the public often clashes with police at demonstrations, and the special unit "Star Force" has garnered a reputation for using undue force to break up rallies.

¶18. (SBU) Key messages for Zahir:

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-- Commend the police for seeking training opportunities and other international assistance.

-- Note that as Maldives gains greater experience with freedom of assembly and of expression, police should develop a stronger understanding of appropriate methods of crowd control and escalation of force.

-- State that rule of law is a vital component of a democracy, and the police must earn the public's trust.

-- The security forces can be important actors in the reform process. It will be important for them to learn more about the pending legislation that may codify reforms.

PUBLIC DIPLOMACY OUTREACH

¶19. (SBU) You will have several opportunities for public diplomacy outreach, including a press conference at the American Corner in Male' and a speech to a local audience about the importance of democratic stability in the region. The Maldivian press is just growing accustomed to a modicum of independence, and most reporters remain somewhat passive. Questions will likely focus on American views about democratization in Maldives. We will provide press points in your briefing packet.

¶20. (SBU) A roundtable discussion with women active in politics, business, and civil society will give you an opportunity to hear from a dynamic, though under-represented, group. Across the political spectrum, women have faced similar barriers to participation and overcome similar obstacles during the reform process. Key message:
-- Congratulate the women for their efforts and emphasize the importance of their continuing to take on leadership roles despite challenges.

¶21. (U) The opening of the GLOBE program in Maldives, likely at a government office with students invited to attend, will provide an opportunity to garner publicity for American environmental efforts. As a low-lying atoll nation, Maldives is particularly vulnerable to the effects of global warming and appreciates any assistance on environmental issues. GLOBE, a hands-on science and education program focusing on earth system science, is funded by NASA and the National Science Foundation in cooperation with the State Department and several U.S. universities. The program allows primary and secondary school students to collect environmental data and communicate with scientists via the internet. More than 19,000 schools in 109 countries are participating in the worldwide effort, and to date students have reported over 16 million measurements in fields from climate to hydrology.
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